

CONSERVATION ZONES IMPROVE LIVELIHOODS OF LAO FISHERFOLK: A CASE STUDY FROM LAOS

Oxfam Novib has partnered with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to establish community managed Fish Conservation Zones in 90 communities of Laos. The zones give fish the chance to reproduce and recover from overfishing, thereby improving villagers' food security, nutritional status and opportunities for generating income. The project is part of the WWF's Greater Mekong Programme, which aims to conserve the river's biodiversity. It has succeeded in winning the support of provincial and district governments by working closely with them, and building trust among government, communities and CSOs.

This Case Study was a background briefing for Oxfam Novib's 2013 Annual Review and describes the programme in Laos. Although it is not a formal evaluation it does consider lessons learned by both Oxfam Novib and its partner organisations.

These Case Studies are shared in the form in which they were submitted, often written by partners whose first language is not English, and have not been edited since submission. We believe that the meaning is clear enough, and the authenticity of the reporting and the availability of Southern Voices on development makes their inclusion in the Oxfam iLibrary worthwhile for sharing with external readers.

Programme Partner: WWF Laos



AIM OF THE PROJECT

The overall objective of the project is to contribute to the expansion of freshwater protected areas and the strengthening of their stakeholders' management capacity, including the central role of women, in three provinces of Laos, to improve people's livelihood while reducing pressure on natural aquatic resources. Achieving this goal serves the additional purpose of strengthening the food security and nutritional status of target communities by providing a reliable and secure access to affordable fish protein from wild fish stocks.

CONTEXT

Worldwide, the WWF is committed to deliver its biodiversity goal through conservation of 35 priority places over the World. The Mekong Complex is one of these "priority places". The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), comprising of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, South Western China, Thailand and Vietnam is home to more than 300 million people providing a highly dynamic context with rapidly changing political, social, economic and environmental conditions. The Mekong Complex covers much of mainland Southeast Asia, an area with tremendous biodiversity and high endemism rates, supporting a range of GPF Flagship and Footprint-impacted species, and linked to several WWF Network Initiatives.

The Greater Mekong Programme (GMP) has the mandate to conserve the Mekong Complex's biodiversity, to reduce the region's footprint, to strengthen the WWF brand presence and local income generation in the region, and to ensure full compliance with Network policy and standards.

The strategic conservation plan for the WWF Greater Mekong Programme (WWF GMP) 2011-2015, with regional and country programmes working in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, outlines the vision and goals for years 2015, 2020 and 2050 as follows:

1. The 2050 vision of the WWF-GMP is: "The ecological integrity of the Greater Mekong is conserved, contributing to a more secure and sustainable future for all. Humanity's footprint stays within the region's capacity to sustain the full diversity of species and ecosystems, and the key services they provide".
2. The 2020 vision of WWF-GMP is: "To ensure effective conservation, sustainable management and climate change resilience across 200,000km², and influence at least an additional 400,000km², in the Greater Mekong region, one of the world's most threatened and biodiverse places".
3. The 2015 Priority Species & Places Goals highlight a focused approach - concentrating on the Mekong River and 8 Priority Landscapes, and on 7 critical species including the iconic tiger. Ensuring the delivery of these biodiversity goals will be the key aim across conservation and operations.

To achieve its conservation goals, the WWF GMP FY2011-FY2015 Strategic Plan presents four overarching strategies to guide conservation activities to be implemented across all the GMP countries in response to the key threats, drivers and limiting factors.

The strategies are:

Strategy 1: Securing landscape integrity and climate change resilience through integrated conservation-economic development planning and implementation.

Strategy 2: Ensuring sustainable hydropower development to maintain ecosystem integrity of the Mekong River, priority tributaries and other rivers in priority landscapes.

Strategy 3: Strengthening law enforcement and protected area management to secure priority habitats and species.

Strategy 4: Securing sufficient sustainable & leveraged financing for conservation.

The strategic plan recognises that it is needed to (i) Secure landscape integrity, where adequate space for and consideration of biodiversity and ecosystem services need be integrated in the development planning processes; (ii) Enhance Climate Change resilience by ensuring the

contribution of ecosystem services are complimentary to and supporting infrastructure (technical) solutions; and (iii) Integrate conservation with economic development planning in multi-sectoral landscape scale, where (sometimes trans boundary) spatial planning processes are crucial to reach the FY2015 goals.

WWF GM has also developed an integrated set of operational strategies to deliver the conservation goals and priorities. It is emphasized that critical to conservation success is having improved information, tools and Human Resource's skills that will enable both WWF and key strategic partners to deliver the necessary compelling and credible analyses and information products that are fundamental to the new strategies. Some of these capabilities are developed strictly "in-house" while others are better suited to a consortium structure (for example, where the results of a planning process must not be seen as driven by a single organization).

DIRECT ENVIRONMENT

Bolikhamsai (Districts: Vienthong, Paksan, Pakading, Khamkeud and Xaichamphone
Khammuane (Districts: Noomalat, Voulapha, Mahaxay and Hinboun)
Savannakhet (Districts: Xepon, Champhone, Xonnabuly, Nong, Phin, Atsaphone)

MAIN ACTORS

The main actors are the rural women and men in the river basins in three central provinces of Lao PDR, namely Bolikhamsai, Khammouan, and Savannakhet provinces. There is an estimated 72,000 people in total, including 30,300 women, in the 90 villages covered by the programme.

The target communities include participation from numerous ethnic groups such as subgroups of the Katu, Ngkriang, Brou, Triang, Khmu and Brao peoples, as well as the lowland Lao people.

It should be noted that within the context of Lao PDR where national nonprofit associations (NPAs) still have limited access to engage in high level lobby and advocacy work to bring about change, INGOs have shown to have competitive advantage in this area. The GoL has been quite receptive to engage with INGOs in the past five years. And in particular for issue that is far too 'daring' such as advocacy on hydropower development in the country, GoL has highly valued and regarded WWF GMPO as one of environmental dialogue partner. Together with other INGOs in the country, WWF GMPO has supported the establishment of the New Fisheries Law 2009. As currently there are no NPAs with the capacity or the willingness to engage on this debate, ONL sees the need to support the effort of WWF GMPO who is very progressive in their approach on directly engaging with GoL. WWF GMPO have provided scientific facts and tools (e.g. valuation of ecosystem services, ecosystem based approach, etc) to assist the government in decision making processes. In cases related to infrastructure and development projects, WWF GMPO's main role is often as a risk assessment specialist to ensure that government and other stakeholders are aware of the consequences of various development activities. These well-established roles are currently unavailable within the NPAs communities. The partnership between ONL and WWF GMPO is aimed to facilitate empowerment of local NPAs, by increasing the level of engagement of NPAs in national/regional dialogue where WWF GMPO actively pursues, linking and learning with NPAs, etc. WWF GMPO is strategically positioned as catalyst or to break ranks and thereby may pave the road for NPAs to be engaged in national dialogues in the future.

WHY DID OXFAM NOVIB GET INVOLVED?

WWF GMPO work contributes to the four change strategies of the Lao country strategy, in particular on the following points:

- Building an assertive community voice; and, a diverse and accountable civil society

- Mainstream women rights and ethnic minority rights in all our productive and reproductive areas of work
- Promote and support an accountable, active and effective government
- WWF GMPO programme fits with the MFS II 2011-2015 phase 2, on Programme Right to a sustainable livelihood.

Key Indicator 1: No. of small-scale crop farmers, cattle farmers, fisher folk, women in particular, able to use sustainable production methods due to the projects and partners enabling them to better protect and use sustainably their livelihood.

Key indicator 4: No. of local partner organisations better able to communicate at the national and international levels the voice of people in rural areas living in poverty (E,G).

WHY DID OXFAM NOVIB CHOSE TO ENTER INTO A PARTNERSHIP WITH THIS COUNTERPART? WHAT TYPE OF SUPPORT HAS BEEN EXTENDED?

- Leveraging existing partnerships. WWF has built trust, communication structures, and collaborative relationships with a number of important regional partners from NGO's to government agencies;
- Pursuing strategic funding opportunities;
- Working with and benefit from WWF Network Initiatives (WWF NI's) to ensure that network resources are brought to bear on projects as well as ensuring that NI's benefit from on the ground contributions to global goals and by sharing of lessons learned.

STRATEGIES

- **Promoting more comprehensive risk assessments associated with Lower Mekong mainstream hydropower development in collaboration with key target groups (governments, financial institutions, developers and civil society).** The true risks of hydropower should be assessed through best tools and processes outlined below, internalizing the external costs of hydropower development. The risk assessment should be understood as both a process of engagement with key target groups, and a product that is useful to understand and better manage risks by approving the right projects, and investing in the right projects applying best practices. Risk assessment is also the overarching package which includes the assessment, tools and standards that WWF GMPO can offer to the key target groups.
- **Promoting alternatives to mainstream hydropower dams with sustainable hydropower on selected Mekong tributaries, or with non-dam sustainable hydropower projects.** The aquatic ecosystem classification will help us identify the tributaries that must be kept free flowing to maintain the ecological integrity of the river system as a whole. Tributaries that do not strictly qualify as free-flowing can still provide essential ecosystem functions through connectivity. This analysis will also help to identify these essential functions, and will help WWF to prioritize the conservation of these non-free flowing tributaries. As for hydropower projects on the tributaries that fall out of the priority criteria according to this analysis, standards proposed in the approach immediately below must be followed.
- **Promoting standards to ensure more sustainable planning, design and operation of hydropower projects.** At the basin level, planning tools are available such as the aquatic ecosystem classification described above, or the complementary basin-wide assessment tool that has been developed together with the Mekong River Commission and the Asian Development Bank. At the project level, the Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol that WWF International has developed with other organizations, one of which is Oxfam, and promoted in the Mekong River Basin can be promoted for existing dams in the Upper Mekong as well as dams on the tributaries in the lower Mekong basin and other priority landscapes.

- **Ensuring that WWF is engaged as a powerful environmental stakeholder in decision making on hydropower.** All of the above wouldn't be possible without WWF's continued engagement as a powerful environmental stakeholder in decision-making on hydropower. WWF's existing work on sustainable hydropower in the region needs to be built on to maintain the recognition of WWF as a credible and solution-oriented organization to work on hydropower.

The implementation of the abovementioned strategies is not a part of this proposal to Oxfam Novib but in its overall work, WWF GMPO will have influenced policies of the Government of Lao as follows:

- Develop better regulations for river basin resources by identifying and clarifying overlapping laws, roles and responsibilities of different ministries/agencies;
- Government of Lao commits to be fully engaged in basin wide risk assessment of mainstream dam development.

ACTIVITIES PER RESULT AREA

Result 1: lessons learnt are shared at national and regional levels through the comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of existing freshwater protected areas, including the biodiversity status of fish conservation zones

- Solid, verified information provides means of verification to thoroughly assess the status of at least 30 FCZ and their committees;
- Final report of previous fish catch monitoring is available and comparable with more recent data
- Fish tagging provides information on important migratory species;
- 6-monthly and yearly meetings ensure good coordination and lessons learnt sharing;
- At least one regional workshop has been conducted and has allowed representatives of Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar to witness fisheries co-management implementation in Laos.

Result 2: pressure on aquatic resources is reduced through the creation of new freshwater protected areas, the improvement of the management capacity of the villagers and local authorities and support to people's livelihood

- 25 new FCZ operational;
- All villages with FCZ active for more than 2 years at the time of project start have operational and functioning FMC and capacity is verified;
- At least 6 small hatcheries operational.

Result 3: villagers and local authorities have improved their understanding of the objectives and benefits of freshwater conservation and fisheries management

- At least another guideline is printed and made available to local partners;
- All existing posters have been updated and reprinted with relevant logos when needed;
- At least 2 new posters have been created with project support;
- All new villages have access to IEC material and have received awareness raising sessions;
- In villages selected for capacity monitoring and assessment, an increase in knowledge and fisheries management capacity can be demonstrated.

IMPACT

Policy and practice changes:

- Expansion of the implementation of the new fisheries law will demonstrate to policy makers the importance of community-based management interventions that protect aquatic biodiversity and habitats as key components of household food security and nutrition.
- Local NGOs/CBOs community will be empowered and be actively engaged in debates around river basin management.
- Private Sector (hydropower developers) will improve the planning for hydropower development.
- WWF GMPO Lao GMP will have influenced policies of hydropower industry, in particular:
- The Lao government will consider Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) through national legislative recognition and support, to fully include rural communities' rights and concerns to manage and use water resources.

SUCCESSSES & FAILURES

Successes:

- Getting the full support of the local government through working closely with them (provincial and district level) and building the capacity of staff of agencies such as those involved in agriculture and fisheries;
- Getting the full support of communities in the importance of participating in the sustainable management of their resources;
- Providing evidence that women, when given the opportunity play an important role in community based resource management and leadership in livelihoods activities;
- Recognition by the government, the communities and other civil society organizations provides a venue for further trust building and cooperation among different stakeholders.

Failures/limitations:

- Project-based engagements provide limited sustainability and follow through by the INGO as it is limited in period and in MOU entered into with the government;
- Follow through by government agencies may also be limited since they lack the resources to monitor once the project ends;
- There is a limitation in policy influencing to protect the gains of the project. The enabling environment (laws and policies) is not sufficient to ensure sustainable resource management which in the long run may impact negatively to what has already been established.

Tips and more

Make activities practical and inclusive. There is no “enemy”, only people, and people can always change their mind.

HUMAN INTEREST



Khammouane Province, Laos

90 Communities in Savannakhet, Khammouan, Bolikhamxay in Central Laos are benefitting from increased food security through a community fisheries project supported by WWF and Oxfam Novib. “Before joining this program the catch was about 1 kilo of fish per family and now it is 5 kilos, one of the women said. Through the Fish Conservation Zones the fish have the chance to reproduce, resulting in improvements of food security as well as income generation. Women’s groups are established to manage wetland resources that are valued by women as key sources of aquatic products for household food security and economic activities. Women also participate in the community fisheries management committees that ensure that the community itself is able to enforce regulations for natural resources management at the local level independently from higher level government authorities. This is a good example of community management of natural resources that can be shared in the region.

According to traditional divisions of labour, in most cases, river fishing is a men’s task while women are responsible for economic activities that result from fishing activities, such as selling the fish or running the food stalls/restaurants where the product is prepared. However, there are some important roles that women play: In those areas that provide the opportunity for wetland management, fishing for aquatic species like snails, shrimps or mussels is a traditional female task and women clearly take the lead in the management committees. Women’s groups under the auspices of the local chapters of the Lao Women’s Union have been the driving forces in the establishment of conservation zones and management of aquatic resources for food security.

Also, women are typically assigned the task of disseminating the regulations and providing education about the importance of fish conservation within the community and in the local schools. Thereby, they make an important contribution to the functioning and sustainability of the project activities.

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This case study was written by Emma Aguinot.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail info@oxfamnovib.nl

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Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, United Kingdom

Oxfam Novib, P.O. Box 30919, 2500 GX The Hague, The Netherlands

WWF Laos, PO.Box 7871, Vientiane, Laos

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